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ABSTRACT

Research on black families in the United States consistently has neglected the black man. To investigate the relationship between marital status and life satisfaction among black men, 253 black adult men from a sociodemographically representative sample of central Florida were interviewed using the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale. Information on health, socioeconomic status (SES), age, and social participation was also gathered. An analysis of the results showed that married black men were significantly less satisfied than unmarried men, including separated ones. Men with higher SES and those who felt they were in better health were more satisfied than their lower SES and less healthy counterparts, but overall dissatisfaction remained present. When controlling the other variables, age was significantly and positively related to satisfaction, with younger adults being least satisfied. It may be that the problems resulting from discrimination have led black men to have low expectations for marriage; this, and other factors such as the educational and sex-ratio disparities between black men and women, may have long-lasting impact on the black family. (BL)

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# MARITAL STATUS AND LIFE SATISFACTION OF BLACK MEN

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ABSTRACT

Although considerable research has addressed the relationship between marital status and perceived well-being, few studies have been of black populations. Particularly neglected has been the study of black men.

This research focuses on the relationship between marital status and overall life satisfaction within a probability sample of 253 black men. Married black men are significantly less satisfied than are the unmarried men (including the separated). This difference persists when controlling health, age, SES, and social participation.

The lower life satisfaction of married black men may result primarily from male/female relationships damaged by the long history of socio-economic disadvantages faced by black Americans.

## INTRODUCTION

Black men and women in the United States face obstacles not encountered by most Americans, and in no facet of life have those obstacles been more onerous than in marital relationships. Historically, slaves were not allowed legal marriage, and families were subject to dissolution by owners. More recently, educational, employment, and housing discrimination have made it difficult for many blacks to support their families. As a result, relationships between spouses suffer, and many families are headed by the mother.[1]

The harmful impact of separation and divorce on objective indicators of black family well-being has been well documented (Ball, 1981; Bianchi, 1981; Glick, 1981). However, less is known of the relationship between marital status and the subjective well-being of black Americans. For example, how are the happiness and satisfaction of black Americans affected by being separated or divorced?

This lack of knowledge is especially pronounced regarding black men, as research on black families in the United States consistantly has neglected the black man. As Cazenave states, the black man is "the phantom of American family studies," and "has been either ignored completely or treated in a very marginal manner" (1981:176). The research that has focused on the black man usually has addressed the underclass, has been social problem oriented, and has used small and nonprobability samples (Gary, 1981).

This study addresses three points previously made here by (1) focusing on black men, (2) addressing the relationship between marital status and subjective well-being, and (3) using a probability sample drawn from a general population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Most prior research relating marital status to life satisfaction or global happiness has focused on the overall or white population. Generally, being married is related to higher levels of overall satisfaction or happiness, whether reported separately for men and women, or for both sexes combined (Bradburn, 1969; Bradburn and Caplovitz, 1965; Campbell et al., 1976; Clemente and Sauer, 1976; Glenn, 1975; Glenn and Weaver, 1979; Veroff et al., 1981; Wilkening and McGranahan, 1978).[2] More detailed studies of men by four or five marital status categories corroborate the more general studies, but provide additional and sometimes conflicting detail. For example, Campbell et al. (1976) found that the married were followed in order of satisfaction level by the widowed, single and separated/divorced (together). Glenn (1975) found little difference in happiness between the widowed, single, and separated/divorced (together), while Gurin et al. (1960) found widowers to be particularly unhappy. Disparities between these findings may result from the use of different control variables in the different studies.

Fewer studies have focused on the overall satisfaction or happiness levels of black Americans. Campbell et al. (1976) used bivariate analysis, reported findings for black men and women together, and found that married and widowed blacks differed little in either life satisfaction or happiness. The separated/divorced and the single were considerably lower on both measures, but tests of significance were not reported. Wray (1974) found no significant differences in happiness between different sex/marital status categories of blacks ages 45-74, with or without controls. Ball (1983) reported life satisfaction

data for black women only, and found that widowed and divorced women were more satisfied than the married, who in turn were more satisfied than the separated or the single. When controls were introduced, this order persisted, but the differences were no longer statistically significant.

These studies of black Americans are not always comparable on a number of bases, e. g., indicator of well-being, population sampled, reporting of sexes together or separately, categorization of the separated, and when used, specific control variables included. Therefore, generalizations are tenuous. However, the available evidence suggests that if in fact significant differences between marital status categories exist, married, widowed and divorced blacks may perceive higher well-being than the separated or single.[3] However, these relationships may be spurious, as no study of blacks cited found marital status differences to be statistically significant in relationship to well-being when using control variables. Also, prior research apparently has not specifically addressed a probability sample of black men of all ages using a standard marital status typology. Obviously, more research is needed on this important topic, particularly in regard to black men.

## METHOD

Data for this study were collected in four counties in central Florida. Mainly rural, the area also includes a number of small towns and two minor standard metropolitan statistical areas.

The overall sample consisted of 3,674 persons ages 18 and over.

Of these, 253 were black men. These black men form the subsample for this study.

Multistage cluster sampling and the randomization technique developed by Kish (1965) were used to ensure that the respondents were representative. The response rate was 86 percent. Comparison of the sample with census data on several standard sociodemographic variables showed that it was representative, and that it included individuals from all socioeconomic classes (Warheit et al., 1976).

The dependent variable of life satisfaction was measured by responses to the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale. This scale was the last item in a 317 question interview schedule which was administered in the respondents' own homes by trained interviewers. The scale was designed to be "symbolic of the 'ladder of life'" (Cantril, 1965:22). Depicting a ladder, it has ten rungs and allows 11 possible responses: 0, the lowest, to 10, the highest. Those scoring 10 indicate that they have the best possible lives for themselves.

The independent variable of marital status is classified in the five standard categories of married (including "common-law"), single, separated, divorced, and widowed. In addition, all marital statuses other than married are combined to form a new category "nonmarried".

Research previously cited, as well as general sociological knowledge, indicates that relationships between marital status and life satisfaction may be influenced by other variables. Therefore, included as controls for the multivariate analysis are socioeconomic status (SES), age, social participation, and health. SES is a composite score of each respondent's level of education,

occupational status score, and total family or household income.[4] Age is age at last birthday. Social participation is a composite score of three items: frequency of interaction with nearby friends, frequency of interaction with nearby relatives, and how often the respondent attends the main worship service of his church. Health measures the individual's own assessment of his current health.

The major hypothesis to be examined is that there will be differences in the mean life satisfaction levels of men with different marital statuses. Due to the few research findings available on satisfaction levels of black men, prediction of the direction of differences is not made. Because of the small numbers of men in the sample who have statuses other than "married," for the multivariate analysis they are considered together in the category of "nonmarried."

Also to be examined are the relationships between satisfaction and SES, age, social participation, and health. Research previously cited, much of it on the general population, leads to prediction that men who have higher SES, who are older, who have higher levels of social participation, and who feel healthier will be more satisfied with their lives.

Analysis of variance is used to examine bivariate relationships. Multiple regression and correlation are used for the multivariate analysis, with pairwise deletion of missing variables. Being categorical, marital statuses are dummy variables.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the bivariate relationships between all variables and life satisfaction. The most satisfied are widowers, followed in order by the divorced, separated, and single. Least satisfied of all are married men. However, these differences are not statistically significant. Next, the marital status categories are combined, with all statuses other than "married" being combined into the category "nonmarried." The nonmarried men are significantly more satisfied with their lives than are the married men, $p < .05$, with a mean satisfaction score difference of .73 (6.56 for nonmarried, 5.83 for married).

Of the other variables investigated, it is found that men with higher SES are more satisfied, $p < .05$, and those who feel they are in better health are more satisfied, $p < .001$. Not significantly related to satisfaction are age and social participation.

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Table 1

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Table 2 shows the multiple regression and correlation matrix. Married men remain significantly less satisfied than the other men, $p < .05$, even when the levels of the other variables in the equation are held constant. Thus, their lower satisfaction levels seem to exist independently of their SES, age, social participation level, and perceived health.

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Table 2

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Also shown in table 2 is that self-evaluated health is the best single predictor of life satisfaction, independent of the other variables (beta (b)= .563, standardized beta (B)=.212). SES remains significantly related to satisfaction, as it is in bivariate relationship, as was shown in table 1. However, age also is significantly related to satisfaction, which it is not in bivariate relationship. The older are more satisfied, at similar levels of the other variables. Social participation, as measured here, still is not significantly related to satisfaction.[5]

The entire regression equation is significant, $p < .001$, although the multiple $r^2$ shows that only 10.8 percent of the variance in satisfaction scores involves linear relationship with the independent and control variables.

The basic research hypothesis regarding a difference in mean life satisfaction levels for men with different marital statuses appears to be supported. Additionally, the predictions regarding SES and health are validated in bivariate relationships. In multivariate analysis, the predictions for all variables other than social participation are confirmed.

## DISCUSSION

This research appears to be the first reported that has specifically addressed the relationship between life satisfaction and marital status for a probability sample of American black men of all ages. Thus, no directly comparable research is available, although there are some studies that have had a similar focus.

Wray's (1974) finding of no significant differences in happiness between

black men with different marital statuses is valid only for middle-aged and older men, as he did not include those under 46 in his study. This research shows that age is significantly and positively related to satisfaction when controlling the other variables.

Research which has not reported the satisfaction levels of black men separate from those of black women provides little guidance for this study, as this and related research show the relationship between marital status and life satisfaction to differ between black men and women. For women, being married is associated with an intermediate, rather than low, mean satisfaction level, although the satisfaction differences are no longer significant when controls are introduced (Ball, 1983). However, as shown here, being married is associated with significantly lower life satisfaction for black men. Thus, when addressing this topic, a control for sex of respondent is necessary.

Comparisons also may be made between these findings and those on white Americans. For white men, research previously cited strongly indicates that being married is associated with higher satisfaction or happiness levels. Thus, this research shows that race, in addition to sex, and age, is an important variable associated with marital status and life satisfaction.

The importance of sex and race variables also is shown by Glenn and Weaver's (1981) finding that overall happiness is more positively correlated with marital happiness for black women and white men than it is for black men. Further evidence on the "lack of benefit" of marriage for black men is provided by Warheit et al.'s (1976) study, which found marriage associated with better mental health for black women and white men, but not for black men.

Thus, a variety of indicators, including the life satisfaction measure used for this study, indicate that black men uniquely derive less subjective, personal benefit from marriage than do other Americans of their same sex or race.

To explain this anomaly, the situation of black men in American society must be addressed.

Lacking power to control their lives and the fates of their families inevitably undermined the family roles of black men under slavery. After emancipation, continued and even increased levels of discrimination kept the black man "in his place," at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. For many, this prevented them from adequately supporting their families. Black women, accustomed to labor outside the home, provided a large proportion of family income. This situation, however, violates traditional American cultural norms of male economic dominance. As Cazenave states: "Black men are generally assumed to be afflicted with two severe handicaps at birth: race and class" (1981:177). Thus, the black man often is forced into a humiliating "double-bind:" he must prove his manhood, but is "denied access to the legitimate tools with which to do so" (1981:178). This historically developed and contemporary fact typically is assumed to lead to poor relationships between black men and women, leading to strife and broken marriages (Taylor, 1977). As Staples writes: "The problems of black male/female conflict are ultimately a function of political and economic forces beyond their control" (1981:175).

Associated with this explanation for the apparent lack of life satisfaction related to marriage for black men are sex-ratio and education disparities. As Spanier and Glick report,

> demographic necessity requires black females to have a more restricted field of marriage eligibles than white females ... black women enlarge their field of eligibles by marrying males who tend to be older, who have lower educational attainment, and who have previously been married ... the "marriage squeeze" young marriageable black women experience may have important consequences for courtship, ... marriage, and marital dissolution. (1980:707) [6]

Thus, the black husband often starts from a disadvantaged position vis-a-vis his wife in regard to educational and marital history. In addition, it must be pointed out that a "pull" factor from marriage exists for the black man. From his perspective, a highly favorable sex-ratio may lead to less interest in maintaining a specific or exclusive relationship. Many men may seek and find more rewarding and less demanding relationships outside of marriage. As Glenn and Weaver write: "... the (black) husband is not dependent enough on the marriage to be highly motivated to try to keep it satisfactory (1981:167).

All of these factors may lead to the lower life satisfaction of black married men found in this study. Particularly disturbing, however, is the fact that the lessened life satisfaction persists when the other variables are controlled. The SES control is expected to reduce the relevancy of situational explanations, as black men with higher incomes, educations, and occupational statuses presumably have surmounted some of the society's barriers. However, lower satisfaction levels exist for the married men, regardless of SES.

It may be that the problems resulting from a long history of discrimination have led to low expectations for marriage on the part of may black men, regardless of their current SES. Coupled with demographic facts, such as the educational and sex-ratio disparities between black men and women, this may have long-lasting impact on the black family.

The research conducted for this study needs to be replicated on other populations of black Americans to ascertain if its findings are valid for the overall black population. If they are, higher income, education, and occupational levels may not ameliorate the apparent marital relationship problems between black men and women. Thus, the social and economic advancement of black Americans may not have the positive impact on the black family that has been expected. And, as Braithwaite writes: "The quality of Black male and Black female relations may determine the growth or destruction of Black people" (1981:94).

Table 1. Life Satisfaction of Black Men, Bivariate Analysis

| Variable | N[a] | $\bar{X}$[b] | S.D. | F | P[c] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAMPLE | 253 | 6.10 | 2.69 | | |
| MARITAL STATUS | 244 | 6.10 | 2.69 | 1.22 | NS |
| Single | 41 | 6.37 | 2.08 | | |
| Married | 154 | 5.83 | 2.75 | | |
| Widowed | 19 | 7.00 | 2.81 | | |
| Separated | 21 | 6.48 | 3.36 | | |
| Divorced | 9 | 6.67 | 2.00 | | |
| (Not Available) | (9) | | | | |
| MARITAL STATUS-COMBINED | 244 | 6.10 | 2.69 | 4.16 | .05 |
| Married | 154 | 5.83 | 2.75 | | |
| Non-married (includes separated) | 90 | 6.56 | 2.55 | | |
| (Not Available) | (9) | | | | |
| SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS | 244 | 6.10 | 2.69 | 1.89 | .05 |
| 0-19 | 76 | 5.54 | 3.25 | | |
| 20-39 | 91 | 6.20 | 2.57 | | |
| 40-59 | 58 | 6.29 | 2.18 | | |
| 60-79 | 10 | 7.00 | 2.00 | | |
| 80-99 | 9 | 7.56 | 1.51 | | |
| (Not Available) | (9) | | | | |
| AGE | 243 | 6.08 | 2.69 | 1.03 | NS |
| 18,19 | 14 | 5.64 | 2.79 | | |
| 20-29 | 43 | 6.35 | 1.88 | | |
| 30-39 | 50 | 6.42 | 2.81 | | |
| 40-49 | 34 | 5.21 | 2.40 | | |
| 50-59 | 36 | 5.89 | 3.16 | | |
| 60-69 | 38 | 6.47 | 2.89 | | |
| 70+ | 28 | 6.07 | 2.84 | | |
| (Not Available) | (10) | | | | |
| SOCIAL PARTICIPATION | 244 | 6.10 | 2.69 | .82 | NS |
| 0-2 | 8 | 4.88 | 3.18 | | |
| 3-5 | 21 | 5.95 | 2.89 | | |
| 6-8 | 68 | 5.85 | 2.86 | | |
| 9-11 | 84 | 6.21 | 2.74 | | |
| 12-14 | 63 | 6.41 | 2.31 | | |
| (Not Available) | (9) | | | | |
| HEALTH | 243 | 6.10 | 2.69 | 5.94 | .001 |
| Very bad | 4 | 1.00 | 1.41 | | |
| Poor | 20 | 5.30 | 3.54 | | |
| Fair | 44 | 5.52 | 2.44 | | |
| Good | 91 | 6.26 | 2.48 | | |
| Excellent | 85 | 6.65 | 2.56 | | |
| (Not Available) | (10) | | | | |

Notes: [a]Ns vary due to missing data.
[b]Range possible: 0 to 10.
[c]Hypotheses tests predict direction, except for marital status and marital status-combined.

Table 2. Life Satisfaction of Black Men, Multiple Regression Analysis

| Variable | b | B | SEb | F | P[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Health | .563 | .212 | .180 | 9.785 | .001 |
| Non-married (incl.sep.) | .796 | .143 | .347 | 5.257 | .05 |
| Age | .026 | .180 | .011 | 6.002 | .01 |
| SES | .025 | .185 | .010 | 5.866 | .01 |
| Social participatiion | .024 | .028 | .056 | 0.190 | NS |
| Constant--includes married | 1.369 | | | | |

| | df | Sum of Squares | Mean Square | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 5 | 189.783 | 37.957 | 5.742 | .001 |
| Residual | 237 | 1566.599 | 6.610 | | |

Standard error: 2.571

| Variable | r | Multiple r | Multiple $r^2$ | $r^2$ change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Health | .251 | .251 | .063 | .063 |
| Non-married (incl.sep.) | .130 | .277 | .076 | .013 |
| Age | .015 | .291 | .085 | .009 |
| SES | .165 | .328 | .107 | .022 |
| Social participation | .104 | .329 | .108 | .001 |

Note: [a]Hypotheses tests for individual betas predict direction except for the variable "non-married."

NOTES

1. In 1980, only 42.2 percent of black children under 18 resided with both parents (Glick, 1981).
2. Studies which differ in this finding regarding the general or white population include Palmore and Luikart (1972), who found no significant difference in satisfaction between married and unmarried men ages 45-69; Edwards and Klemmack (1973), who found that adding controls meant the loss of bivariate satisfaction differences between men and women (together) ages 45 and over; and Spreitzer and Snyder (1974), who found no significant marital differences in satisfaction for men and women (together).
3. The discrepancy between Campbell et al.'s (1976) and Ball's (1983) findings regarding the separated and divorced may be due to the former's having aggregated the two categories together. As with Ball's sample, their separated respondents' scores may have been lower than the scores of the divorced.
4. Norms are based on those developed for the total sample, and thus reflect the distribution of these variables in the local area, but not specifically for the black population (Holzer, 1978; Nam et al., 1975; Warheit, 1979).
5. Relationships between the control variables are low ($r \leq .38$), except for that between age and SES ($r = -.53$).

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